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ABSTRACT

Views of former adult literacy students about their learning experience were ascertained in a study. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 68 former students from 2 adult literacy programs in the Inner West of Sydney (Australia). A literature review focused on the following topics: characteristics of adult basic education (ABE) students; reasons for participating in ABE programs; program outcomes; articulation; and reasons for leaving ABE. Approximately half the interview sample gave employment-related reasons for participating in adult literacy classes. Participants expected a school-like environment. Respondents' feelings about the learning experience were affected by the following factors: teacher-student relationship; student relationships; changes in teachers; class size; lesson content; and approaches to teaching. Not all participants were happy with their learning experience, but they almost unanimously claimed to have achieved positive outcomes from participating. Both classroom-related and nonclassroom reasons for leaving were reported. Suggestions for improvement focused on ABE program structure or curriculum type issues. Major study findings included: (1) positive outcomes repored by participants; (2) the discrepancy between expectations and the reality of ABE programs; and (3) the disparate range of students' ability levels and needs. (Appendixes include enrollment statistics, an interview guide, and 55 references.) (YLB)

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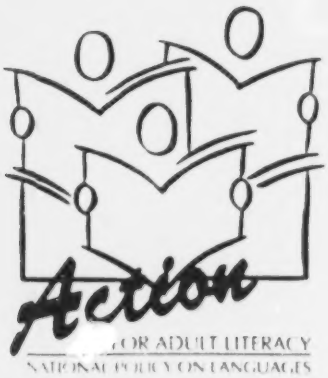

THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

PERSPECTIVES OF FORMER PARTICIPANTS FROM TWO ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMMES

Stephen Black and Susan Sim

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A project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training under the National Policy on Languages

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABE - Adult Basic Education
ALIO - Adult Literacy Information Office
AMEP - Adult Migrant Education Programme
AMES - Adult Migrant Education Service
CABE - Certificate in Adult Basic Education
CAE - Council of Adult Education
DEET - Department of Employment, Education and Training
ESOL - English to Speakers of Other Languages
HELP - Helping Early Leavers Programmes
HSC - Higher School Certificate
NESB - Non-English Speaking Background
NSW - New South Wales
RAWFA - Reading and Writing For Adults
TAFE - Technical and Further Education
UNE - University of New England
WOW - Work Opportunities for Women

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Adult basic education: 'A growth business'

Adult literacy programmes, which fall within the general umbrella of adult basic education (ABE), have been operating in New South Wales since the early 1970s. Prior to this time it appears that the relative absence of literacy abilities in the adult population was not recognised as an issue of major concern (see Dymock 1982). From these early beginnings in which classes were first held in evening colleges (see Wickert 1988), adult literacy provision has grown enormously. In fact one study makes reference to ABE (in TAFE) as a 'growth business' (Rustomji & Dent 1986). During 1989 for example, more than 15,000 students were enrolled in various TAFE ABE programmes, and a further 2,500 in literacy programmes funded partly by the NSW Board of Adult Education (Metherell 1990). Additionally literacy classes are run by AMES, and the State Government's Helping Early Leavers Programme (HELP) and Skillshare courses. The small-group teaching mode predominates in these programmes, though there is also one-to-one volunteer tutoring in TAFE and some non-government organisations

Despite this enormous growth in provision, we know surprisingly little about participants in these programmes, or how effective the programmes are. For example, in the introduction to a 1987 statewide survey of adult basic education in NSW, it was stated that: "None of the providers could present details on totals of ages, sex, ethnicity or employment status of all students in their programmes." (Kessler 1987 p.2). Referring to the national picture of ABE, Wickert and Zimmerman (1989) make reference to: "...our lack of clear documentation of current provision and practice...(p.167) ... we have little idea of research information...we have little idea of outcomes..." (p.168). And Lo Bianco (1987) in an address to a national conference on adult literacy stated: "...we need to know a great deal more than we do about the characteristics of the participants and the reluctant participants." Recently efforts have been made to remedy the situation and to provide at least a data base on ABE enrolments (see *TAFE Adult Basic Education Enrolment Statistics Report 1988, 1989*).

Today there is a sense of urgency in the need to research and evaluate adult literacy programmes. Accountability and economic rationalism are making demands on educators. Continued funding for all education programmes is increasingly linked to the necessity of demonstrating the effectiveness and efficiency of programmes. Questions are being asked about what happens to students who participate in adult literacy programmes. What are the outcomes? This context partly explains why this study came about, though for the authors of this study it has always been more than any accountability or evaluation exercise. Our primary aim from the beginning has been to gain a greater understanding of ABE students and their learning experiences.

Questions to be answered

The main purpose of this study is to outline the reflective perspectives of former students in adult literacy programmes; to present their views on their learning experience. In particular we wanted to know what former students got out of participating. In looking at outcomes it is also important to know why they participated in the first place. What were their motives? What did they hope to achieve? And did the learning experience match their expectations? And if not, why not? With an awareness that articulation on to other courses is currently a major educational goal in adult education, we also wanted to know where participants went after they left the literacy programme. Did they 'drop out' of adult education altogether, or go on to further study of some kind? Was

the adult literacy programme seen by them as an end in itelf, or the beginning of a new learning experience? Or even if they didn't venture on to other forms of study, did they feel they had benefited from the experience of participating in the course? Finally, we wanted to know why they left? Did they feel they had achieved their goals, or were there other factors which caused them to discontinue participating?

With answers to these questions programme managers and others may be in a better position to judge the effectiveness of adult literacy programmes. Through a greater understanding of the participatory behaviour of low literate adults, about their motivations for and barriers to, participating in literacy programmes, we will hopefully be in a better position to initiate changes to improve these programmes.

Brief description of the study and the research method

The study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with sixty-eight former students from two adult literacy programmes; one from a TAFE college, and the other from an evening college. Both colleges draw on students from a similar geographical area in the Sydney Inner West. All interview respondents had participated in one or other of these programmes during the 1988 academic year.

Only one type of literacy provision is focussed on, small group classes. In TAFE these classes are known as RAWFA classes (Reading and Writing For Adults), and have the accredited course number 1962. Small group classes in evening colleges vary in their title, but in our sample college, the term RAWFA was similarly used.

Following approval from TAFE and the NSW Board of Adult Education to conduct the study, contact was made with the co-ordinators of the two programmes, and attendance rolls at the colleges were consulted in order to extrapolate all students who had participated and since left in 1988 and who might form a potential interview sample. The period of participation in the programme ranged from just one session to virtually the whole academic year. Our interview sample was chosen on the basis of those who could be contacted and were available and willing to be interviewed. All interviews took place in May and June 1989, often in the respondents' homes, or an alternative convenient location.

Other research studies have indicated the methodological problems, and in particular, the issue of generalising findings from follow-up studies due to the often low response rates (eg Darkenwald & Valentine 1985). In our study though, we make no claims to have a fully 'representative' interview sample. The nature of our study, adopting an ethnographic approach using semi-structured interviews, is such that generalising our findings to apply to other ABE contexts is not our major concern, but rather, to gain a more in-depth understanding of the perspectives of members of our target group. We do nevertheless feel our sample of sixty-eight, being approximately a third of the total former student population of the two colleges, is quite representative of former students from these colleges. Few of the former students approached with the request for an interview actually refused. We certainly make no claims that our findings can be generalised to the college situation in other regions of NSW with different population mixes, such as in country colleges. And even within Sydney these student populations are likely to differ in some respects from our catchment region, the Inner West.

One interviewer was employed to conduct all the interviews. This had the advantage of consistency in interview style. Initial contact with the interview sample was made by phone to explain the purpose of the research, and to request an interview in person. In some cases telephone interviews were conducted when respondents did not wish to be interviewed in person. Interviews were arranged at a time and place to suit the respondents, and every effort was made to accommodate the wishes of respondents (see Allen 1989). Where possible, and with the consent of respondents, the interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed in full.

Why a qualitative study?

There were a number of reasons for opting for a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews. For a start, we were alerted at an early stage by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) in Canberra of a more extensive National Policy on Languages study looking at outcomes of ABE programmes to be conducted by researchers at the University of New England (Brennan, Clark and Dymock 1989). Their study was also to be based mainly on interviews, but it was to cover a representative national picture including a range of adult literacy programmes run in various organisations. We could see there was some overlap in the aims of the two projects, but the UNE study necessarily, in view of their broader student reach, required greater interview structure and thus required a more quantitative research approach. In presenting a representative national picture of ABE programme outcomes the UNE study would not be able to focus on the individual perspectives of former students in any depth. Our more qualitative study looking closely at individual perspectives we hope will be complementary to the UNE study.

We were also influenced in our research method by the work of researchers such as Rockhill (1982) who strongly argues for qualitative studies of participation in adult education. Rockhill compared qualitative and quantitative approaches and advocated the former approach in order to indicate the human uniqueness of individuals. Our research method of semi-structured interviews has the potential to provide rich insights into the participatory behaviour of low literate adults, and seems most appropriate to fulfil the aims of our study. Quite a number of other researchers in the field of adult literacy in Australia and overseas favour qualitative-type approaches, often involving semi-structured interviews and case studies (eg Gribble & Grant 1983; Grant 1985, 1987; Brennan & Brennan 1984,1990; Lowe 1987; Black 1989; Eberle & Robinson 1980; Johnston 1985; Charnley & Jones 1978; Levine 1980,1986).

Cautionary notes: Hidden agendas

As indicated earlier, there are two major providers of adult literacy programmes in NSW: TAFE, mainly through the Division of ABE, and the Board of Adult Education which partly funds literacy programmes in evening and community colleges. It would be naive of us as researchers not to acknowledge that some degree of friction and rivalry has developed at times between these two organisations over the provision of adult literacy programmes in NSW, though it appeared to be a non-issue for the two Inner West colleges selected for this study.

As our study focusses on adult literacy provision in one TAFE college and one evening college it concerns us that our findings may be used (or misused) to lend support to the interests of either of these two organisations. Clearly though we have little say over how our findings will be interpreted, and we can only state our determination to present our findings as accurately as we can. These issues are particularly critical with the release of two major reports reviewing adult education and ABE in NSW (Scott 1989, Parry 1989).

Our intention though is not to compare ABE programmes from either of these organisations and generally we will not even identify former students with a specific organisation. In fact it would be unfair to make any direct comparisons as, despite some similarities in provision, there are also important differences. There are similarities in the sense that both TAFE ABE and evening/community colleges offer small group adult literacy classes, and all these classes are of an open entry/exit type. Importantly also, neither organisation charges fees for their adult literacy programmes. On the differences side it needs to be acknowledged that TAFE has a far greater resource allocation for adult literacy. There are many full time ABE teachers in the state (about 250) and a hierarchical ABE career structure (ie Teachers in Charge, Head Teachers, Senior Head Teachers, Heads of Division). There are strict guidelines on class sizes (no more than six students for RAWFA) in recognition of the necessity for individualised programming due to the differing needs and levels of students; classes take place twice a week for three hours each session; day and

evening sessions are usually available; and facilities are often specifically designed for adult literacy (see Persson 1985). As the ABE handbook clearly indicates, ABE is regulated in areas such as minimum resources and assessment procedures (see ABE Handbook 1989). Evening/community college provision on the other hand is relatively under-resourced (Parry 1989) and unregulated, depending largely on local conditions and needs and the views of college boards and principals. Classes are kept small, but numbers nevertheless have been known to fluctuate beyond the six-to-one ratio. All teachers are part time with direct responsibility to the principal, and classes usually only operate in the evening. The adult literacy provision in both organisations reflects the relative financial resources available to each. As to the merits of each organisation, TAFE advocates no doubt draw attention to their quality provision (some might say exemplary provision). Evening or community college advocates would highlight their flexibility in responding to local community needs despite their relative lack of resources and ABE infrastructure.

The task for us as researchers is to present accurately the perspectives of our interview sample, not to reflect on the shortcomings or otherwise of the respective organisations. By the same token though, if weaknesses in a particular programme appear to affect the participatory behaviour of students, then we should not shy away from adopting a critical perspective.

A negative bias

It needs to be remembered that all interviewees are *former* students who discontinued their participation in an adult literacy programme during the 1988 academic year. Our focus on this target group was due to our particular interest in looking at reasons for students leaving ABE, especially in view of the widely held perception that drop-out rates are very high in adult literacy programmes (though the evidence for this in Australia seems largely absent, unlike in the United States - see literature review p.8). Inevitably many of the interview respondents in our study would have left the ABE programme due to dissatisfaction with some aspect of the provision, and this will be evident from their comments. Many of the least dissatisfied students presumably remained in the programme. It needs to be borne in mind therefore, that there is likely to be a bias towards more negative feelings about adult literacy programmes. If we focussed only on current participants (as many studies have), then the opposite would be more likely. As Jones & Charnley (1978, p.93) noted in their study:

There were very few complaints or adverse criticism: but then we were interviewing the stayers. Similar interviews with dropouts or with non participants would no doubt have drawn a different picture.

In view of these points, this study should not be seen as an evaluation of two adult literacy programmes. If it was our intention to conduct an evaluation then we would have interviewed not only current students in addition to those who left the programme, but also the views of teaching staff and all others involved with the programmes. Our primary aim, as stated earlier, is to learn more about adult literacy students; their perspectives, their motivations to participate, what they thought about their learning experience, what they got from the programme, and finally, why they left. The primary focus therefore is on former student perspectives, which provides but one element of an evaluative picture of ABE programmes.

Chapter outline

The next chapter provides a review of the main research findings in areas pertinent to this study, including the characteristics of ABE students, reasons for participating in ABE programmes, programme outcomes, articulation and reasons for leaving ABE (ie mainly drop-out studies)

Chapter three comprises our research findings from interviews with sixty-eight former ABE students. It provides first a profile of members of the interview sample and then examines interviewee responses to questions on why they participated in the ABE programme, what expectations they had prior to participating, what the learning experience was like for them, what they felt they got from participating (outcomes), why they left the

programme, and finally, what ABE programme improvements or changes they would like to see made.

Chapter four, the final chapter, highlights some of the essential issues and findings in the study and discussion focusses on their implications for ABE provision generally.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In undertaking this study it would be helpful to have a good selection of Australian research to build on, but unfortunately this isn't the case. There are a few pertinent Australian studies which will be referred to quite often, but generally there isn't much, hence the necessity at times to draw on relevant overseas studies, mainly from Britain and the United States

This literature review covers two broad aspects. First it provides an outline of the characteristics of ABE students, then it looks at issues to do with participation, including research findings on reasons for participating in ABE, the outcomes of participation, articulation onto other courses, and reasons for leaving ABE.

The ABE student population

The most recent NSW data on the profile of ABE students are provided by the *TAFE Adult Basic Education Enrolment Statistics* (1988 and 1989). Focussing here in particular on the small-group literacy teaching mode (RAWFA), which is the subject of this study, a number of salient characteristics emerge. We find for example, slightly more female students than male; students are mainly in the 20-29, followed by the 30-39 year age category; many are unskilled (33%), unemployed (20%), in receipt of some form of social security benefit (15%) or have no source of income (15%); about a third are of non-English speaking background (NESB); the majority did not proceed beyond year 9 at school; and predominantly their stated goal in participating in a literacy class was to improve their employment prospects (see Appendix 1 for full details).

Perhaps the best overall national ABE picture is provided by the recent University of New England (UNE) study by Brennan et al (1989) on outcomes of ABE programmes. Their study sample comprised over 500 students (including ex-students) from all states and covered a range of adult literacy programmes. They found there were more males than females participating (55% compared to 45%); most were in the 21-30 and 31-40 age group (though with a mean age of 35 years); about a third were in full employment and a small percentage in part time employment (6.5%), mainly in labouring, sales work and plant operation; and the majority of students (63%) had seven to ten years of schooling.

However, there are many variations in student characteristics in adult literacy programmes. Doherty (1987) for example, found in a Northern Territory adult literacy project (*Project Read*), a higher percentage of male students, a relatively high percentage of students under 20 years (28% for the 1984-86 period) and a high percentage of students who had completed only primary school (29%). In an early study of the Melbourne Council of Adult Education's adult literacy project (*The Way Out* 1974), again most students were male, a large percentage were under 25 (40%) and few had gone beyond third form (year 9). Grant and Hayles (1980) further outline that most had unskilled jobs which lacked occupational prestige and promotion opportunity, and the rate of unemployment was relatively high. They also indicated low self esteem and family traumas as characterising many adult literacy students. In another Victorian study by Coates and Sutherland (1984), it was found that quite a high percentage of students had previously attempted year 11 and 12 at school (21%), and also a relatively high percentage were in full employment (42%). Clearly the variations in these findings reflect the differences in adult literacy provision and also regional differences within Australia. Doherty's Northern Territory study for example, had many Aboriginal students, whilst relatively few would have been participating in the Melbourne programmes. Some of the programmes also were based on volunteer one-to-one tuition, whilst others were based on small group classes in colleges. In consequence it is hardly surprising that

student characteristics vary a lot. Generally though, adult literacy students do tend to be younger (though a mean of 35 years may have surprised a few people in the Brennan et al 1989 study) and, based on their level of formal education and occupation, they tend to comprise lower socio-economic status and these trends seem to be repeated in overseas studies in Britain and the United States (eg Jones & Charnley 1978; Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox 1975).

Why participate in ABE?

It is recognised in adult education research generally, that transitions in people's lives, such as job changes, marriage, and the arrival of children, can act as 'trigger events' which result in participation in an education programme (see: Aslanian & Brickell 1980; Glustrom 1983). Levine (1986) in his adult literacy study similarly makes reference to 'critical events' in people's lives which cause many to undertake a literacy programme. He states that up to a third of his research sample identified a specific factor, for example, the need for parents to help their young children with reading. They represent, in Levine's words, the 'objective push' factors which encourage people to undertake new learning ventures. Coates and Sutherland in their Victorian adult literacy study, in answer to the question they posed: "What triggers the decision to participate?" found that employment or vocational reasons were cited most often. Other factors they identified were: "imposed leisure time" (eg through retrenchment or imprisonment); parenthood (eg reading to children); family crisis (eg marriage break up, death of spouse) and social needs (ie "I just want to be like everyone else"). There is some correspondence here with Jones and Charnley's (1978) classification of reasons for enrolling which included: vocation (better jobs), parenthood (reading to children), social opportunity ("..it would give me a better start"), social interaction ("they will know I'm illiterate the moment I open my mouth") and self image.("..you are dim you know. If you cannot write something down on a bit of paper..")

ABE outcomes

There seems to be two main approaches to researching the outcomes of ABE programmes. The first is in a quantitative, some might say 'objective' way, favoured in many United States studies, and the alternative is a more qualitative, 'subjective' way, which has been taken up in a number of British and Australian and occasionally United States studies. In the former approach, researchers want to know basically, to what extent have students actually improved their reading and writing through participation in the ABE programme. Diekhoff (1988) for example, uses this as his criterion to measure ABE outcomes from which he concludes that on average students only improve one or two reading age grade levels (based on pre and post testing). On this basis he states:

The majority of adult literacy participants do not accomplish meaningful, practically significant reading improvements and leave training without having achieved 'functional literacy,' however one may choose to define it. (p.625).

Diekhoff is very critical of self reports by students commonly used to indicate the effectiveness of ABE programmes. He states:

..it is a rare individual who can invest time, money, and effort in an enterprise, only to judge subsequently that enterprise to be a failure, a waste of time and effort. (p.628).

Diekhoff has a point, but it can also be argued that really, the bottom line is what the students themselves think they got out of a literacy programme. Reading grade level increases by themselves may mean very little. How better participants function in society according to their own judgements may be more valid. It may not present as 'objective' according to Diekhoff's way of thinking, but it is the criterion that carries greatest weight with many researchers in ABE, and is seen by them to be entirely valid. For example, in another United States study by Darkenwald and Valentine (1985), self reporting by ex-students was the favoured methodology for a study of ABE outcomes. They came to the conclusion that the students themselves did not consider 'academic' achievement to be

the most important outcome, but rather "..enhanced self confidence or self esteem and the psychic rewards of personal accomplishment" (p.21). They further commented:

In view of the generally lower levels of self-esteem, self-confidence, and tangible accomplishments among this population, these affective outcomes take on special significance. Moreover, they are not only valuable as ends in themselves, but as means or necessary conditions for continuing personal growth and accomplishment, both academically and in the world outside the classroom. (p.21).

Darkenwald and Valentine state that the major implications of their research for practice in adult literacy programmes is that the current focus on employment related outcomes may be inappropriate in view of the fact that for participants, the important outcomes seem to have little to do with employment.

Similar conclusions in relation to the importance of affective factors were reached by Charnley and Jones (1978,1979) several years before in Britain. Australian researchers have generally followed their approach and have used self reports usually based on interviews to reach similar conclusions about the significance of affective factors for adult literacy students (Grant 1985,1987). The recent UNE study on ABE outcomes also was underpinned by the research findings of Charnley and Jones.

Articulation

Another line of inquiry not taken up in many studies is whether students go on to further education courses (usually referred to as articulation) following participation in ABE programmes. Few studies have kept records on former students, and there are obvious difficulties in doing so, as there are in any follow-up studies. Coates and Sutherland (1984) did attempt to follow up former adult literacy students from the Holmesglen adult literacy programme in Victoria, and found a considerable number (146 of a total sample of 496, which doesn't include the large number of those unable to be contacted) had gone on to further study in a whole range of areas. Doherty (1986) in her Northern Territory study found about a third of former adult literacy students from the *Project Read* programme (based on those who responded to a postal questionnaire) had tackled some form of further study, and most coped or were coping quite well.

Leaving ABE

Of course all students leave ABE at some time, but others leave early ie they drop out. We have some reticence in using the term drop-out due to the nature of adult literacy programmes. With the open entry/exit participation patterns common with RAWFA classes, the concept of drop-out may be inappropriate. For example, a student may participate in a class for no more than a few weeks in order to achieve a specific goal (one common example being to obtain a driving licence), and then leave straight after. According to the attendance records this may appear as a drop-out, though in fact for the student involved, it was a course completion. The only way to accurately determine who dropped out and who didn't, is to ask the former students themselves.

United States researchers appear to have few qualms about citing drop-out figures for ABE programmes, in fact they stress that it constitutes a most serious problem. Balmuth (1988, p.621) for example, states that: "High rates of absenteeism and drop-out plague ABE programmes everywhere". And Boraks (1981) states that ninety per cent of ABE students drop out before their ninety-ninth hour of tuition.

Most of the dropping out occurs early in ABE programmes, in fact according to Jones and Charnley (1978), many drop out before they even begin! In one scheme they studied in Britain, of 102 students who applied to join and later withdrew over the next 18 months of the course, 24 withdrew before being interviewed and 29 withdrew before being assigned to tuition. In Australia, the evaluation of the Melbourne CAE literacy programme revealed also that many drop out before actually commencing properly in the programme, and they put this down to lack of student motivation, family problems and unexpected commitments, and those having 'cold feet' (Grant & Hayles 1980). Due to this propensity for

early drop out from ABE programmes the initial interview needs to be handled sensitively to accommodate the feelings of low literate adults (see Gribble 1978).

Interestingly, it was noted in an earlier study of the Melbourne programme that those who dropped out tended to be male (Council of Adult Education 1977). A number of overseas studies have attempted to characterise those who stay ie the persisters, and those who drop out. Heathington, Boser and Salter (1984) for example, also found females stayed more than males, and that adults with children stayed more than those without children. Diekhoff and Diekhoff (1984) in another United States study identified particular student types most likely to drop out. They tended to be those who were: young and hispanic, not seeking formal qualifications, unemployed, and those who had other illiterate family members. Taylor and Boss (1985) linked course completion in ABE to locus of control. They concluded that those who completed the course were more 'internally controlled' that is, they were a type who took more responsibility for their own behaviour and condition, compared to 'externals', those who tend to ascribe responsibility to other factors than themselves.

A number of classifications of factors have been identified as responsible for drop-out generally in adult education. Darkenwald (1981) provides an extensive framework including the following factors: sociodemographic (eg age, educational attainment), psychological (eg aptitude, ability), external situational (eg illness, transport, work clashes), programme context (eg number of course sessions, scheduling), teaching-learning (eg expectations, classroom climate, interactions), and satisfaction (eg dissatisfaction with teaching or the course). Of these, Darkenwald suggests that course dissatisfaction is the best single predictor of drop-out in adult education, and particularly important are factors associated with teaching-learning. In a later paper he extends his argument highlighting the importance of the classroom environment, and he suggests that drop out can be largely a function of discrepancies between initial expectations and the actual classroom experience (Darkenwald & Gavin 1987). Boshier's (1973) concept of 'congruence' between students and the educational environment to explain who stays and who leaves adult education programmes is also significant. Another United States study by Garrison (1985) argued that goal clarity and course relevance for students were particularly important factors to consider in predicting drop-out in ABE.

Australian studies are quite limited in comparison. Mallise (1986), in a follow-up study of adult literacy students enrolled in the Hunter region of NSW, found that forty-five percent of students were not in the course six months later. However, many of these considered they were only temporarily not receiving tuition, and would return when their life circumstances improved, and a small percentage (8%) didn't even start classes. The main reasons given for leaving were classified as: family or personal problems, work or study commitments, and inadequate programme provision. In an earlier Melbourne study (Council of Adult Education 1977) reasons for leaving were categorised as 'non personal' (ie dissatisfaction with some aspect of the programme) and 'personal' (ie external causes), and the point was made that the overwhelming majority of students would give "personal" reasons for leaving. Finally, in a related study by Kessler (1984) focussing on Adult Migrant Education Programmes (AMEP), reasons for leaving were classified as structural/personal or course reasons. Kessler found that whilst course factors such as the level, pace and the teaching styles of courses were important, of much greater importance were the "conflicting pressures of work and domestic responsibility" which especially affects the economically and educationally disadvantaged who make up the majority of AMEP students. Kessler concludes that it is the relationship between socio-environmental factors and student self confidence that largely determines whether students leave early.

Some methodological problems

Before leaving this literature review some points should be made about methodological problems involved in researching these aspects of participation. For a start, responses from low-literate adults based on research methods such as postal questionnaires would have to be treated

with caution. Quite apart from not having sufficient literacy ability to answer a questionnaire satisfactorily, students or former students with negative views on their ABE learning experience may be less likely to respond to such a questionnaire than those who gained a lot from the experience. Adult literacy students, in view of well documented low self-esteem factors, may be reluctant to criticise an adult literacy programme, believing perhaps that it was their failure, or their inability to learn that made their learning experience unrewarding, rather than inadequate aspects of the ABE provision.

The truthfulness of respondent's perspectives needs also to be considered. For example, Cross's (1981) comments about situational as opposed to dispositional factors being cited most often as barriers to participation in adult education programmes would also appear to be equally relevant to the issue of drop-out. Cross states:

....it is far more acceptable to say that one is too busy to participate in learning activities than it is to say that one is not interested, is too old, or lacks ability. (p.107).

Thus, applied to drop-out, an adult literacy student may well cite factors such as job clashes or lack of time as the reasons for discontinuing participation in the programme, rather than the 'real' reason which might be that classes were boring, teaching methods inappropriate or personal attention was lacking.

Teachers and organisers of adult literacy programmes may also not be the most appropriate people to interview their own students or former students about issues such as satisfaction with the course or course outcomes. How many students in such circumstances will be prepared to openly criticise the programme, especially if they think they are 'dumb' and will never learn anyway?

These problems in getting at more accurate student perspectives would lend support to the approach taken in this research study, which is to use relatively unstructured, recorded, in-depth interviews conducted by an interviewer without any vested interests in the outcomes. We believe this approach is likely to elicit more accurate student feelings and perspectives than a more 'structured' research approach.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

A profile of the interview sample

It would seem appropriate, prior to examining the interview sample perspectives, to look at some of the demographic and educational characteristics of the sample and, where relevant, to compare these to the characteristics of ABE student populations mentioned in the beginning of the literature review. The following characteristics are looked at: sex of students, age, language background, employment status, and period of participation in the ABE programme.

Sex of students

As Table 1 indicates there are slightly more females than males in our interview sample, which in percentage terms differs little from those found by Brennan et al (1989) nationally in Australia (ie they found 55% female, 45% male).

TABLE 1: Sex of students

	N	%
male	32	47
female	36	53
Total	**68**	**100**

Age

As Table 2 indicates, the largest age category is 20-29, though the mean age for the sample is 36 years (which also closely matches the national mean figure of 35 years in Brennan et al 1989), reflecting the even distribution of students in the 30-39, 40-49 and 50-59 age groups.

TABLE 2: Ages

	N	%
15-19	9	13
20-29	18	27
30-39	13	19
40-49	13	19
50-59	12	18
60-69	2	2
70+	1	2
Total	**68**	**100**

Language background

The multi-ethnic nature of the catchment area of the Inner West of Sydney is reflected in there being more non-English speaking background (NESB) students than English speaking (see Table 3) and a very wide range of nationalities (Table 4).

TABLE 3: Language background

	N	%
NESB	44	65
ESB	24	35
Total	**68**	**100**

By way of some comparison, TAFE ABE statistics show that a third of RAWFA students were from non-English speaking backgrounds in 1988.

TABLE 4: Nationalities

Country	N
Italy	7
Greece	6
Sri Lanka	5
Lebanon	5
Uruguay	3

The following countries are each represented by just one former student: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Portugal, France, Timor, Spain, India, Peru, Iran, Japan, Korea, Holland, W.Germany, Hong Kong, Turkey, Poland.

TABLE 6: Period of participation in ABE

	N	%
1 session or less	2	4
1 week	5	9
2 to 4 weeks	11	20
4 to 6 weeks	9	16
6 to 8 weeks	5	9
8 to 10 weeks	3	5
10 to 12 weeks	3	5
more than 12 weeks	15	28
more than 6 months	3	5
Total	**56**	**80**

Please note: not a complete interview sample

Employment status

The interview sample were simply asked whether they were currently employed or not. As Table 5 indicates, about half the sample stated they were in employment. Details were not asked about type of employment.

TABLE 5: Current employment status

	N	%
Employed	36	53
Unemployed	32	47

Period of participation

As indicated earlier in this study, the period of participation in an ABE programme for each of the interview sample varied a lot. Table 6 indicates that this period varied from just one session to more than six months.

The interview schedule

Originally it was intended that there would be no interview schedule as such, just a number of key issues for interviewers to focus on. In this way it was envisaged there would be more likelihood of accurate respondent perspectives. With little structure the interview might take on a more relaxed, informal, interpersonal mode in which respondents would have the opportunity to influence the direction of the interview. This was to be in contrast to asking a set of questions in a prescribed order, very much in the formal interview mode. In practice though, there was a compromise following discussions with prospective interviewers who felt the need for more interview structure. The interview structure is shown in Appendix 2. Although key topics were covered, it did allow for flexibility. The topics did not have to be covered in any particular order, though the schedule pre-empted the most likely/appropriate order, and all responses, apart from some early demographic/educational questions, were open ended and tape recorded.

REASONS FOR PARTICIPATING

'Well I don't want to spend the rest of my life in a factory eh!" (Luis)

Approximately half the interview sample gave employment-related reasons for participating in adult literacy classes. These reasons included: wanting to get a better job, finding a job, coping with the demands of their current job, and changing jobs because of a work accident.

Wanting to get a better job was particularly important. John for example, stated he was in a "dead end" job. Others members of the sample made similar comments about their current job prospects.

For some, getting past first base to find a job was too difficult. Gaby was deterred by the prospect of filling in a form for a factory job.

"Last time I went to a job interview in a factory and didn't know how to fill out the form. I just know how to put my name and address, that's all. And that's why I didn't get the job."

Mario was of the opinion that any job would involve some writing, no matter how low-skilled it was.

"You see some jobs, gate keeper or security, something, you've got to write reports so you should be able to write."

Commonly students also felt their spoken English wasn't sufficient for a job.

Maria felt that her work in the florist required her to use more literacy skills than she felt confident with. She mentioned taking down a phone message as an example. Maria also perceived that the people at work put her down for her inadequate literacy skills, though it is difficult to assess whether this was an accurate perception or not. For Maria, it seems her wish to improve her literacy skills for work was more generally based; inadequate literacy affected many areas of her work and self image.

Others often had a specific literacy skill in mind that needed improvement. David for example, stated he needed perfect spelling for his work because he was a compositor (who sets up the typing for printing).

Two respondents were forced to look for work which involved more literacy skills because of an accident. One of them, Pedro, was a rigger in the construction industry when he had a car accident. He wasn't able to do manual work anymore so he decided to learn more English and writing to help him look for another job. The other respondent, Yvette, had worked in a factory for 15 years and developed repetitive strain injury (RSI). As a result she went on workers' compensation but started literacy classes so she could get a clerical job.

"I really wanted to get into childcare." (Tanya)

Although work-related reasons for participating predominated, they were often combined with other reasons, such as continuing further study.

Some wanted to do a specific course, like Tanya who wanted to get into a childcare course. Others, like John, didn't have a specific goal in mind. He wanted to go back and get his HSC. He stated he wanted to improve his basic skills and self confidence in order to eventually get into a business or real estate course.

"I just thought because people were saying things like "Oh don't you know what that word means?" or "you should know that." (Marie)

This lack of self-confidence and poor self image appeared to affect many in the sample and caused them to participate, though it wasn't often specifically expressed by the respondents as lack of confidence, but rather, it can be inferred from their comments about other aspects of their lives. Some of those with very poor spoken English were particularly affected. Dianne, for example, who was Sri Lankan born, stated that she spent a lot of time at home because she dreaded mispronouncing words and being made to look a fool. Mary's lack of confidence was linked in to her need to be

independent, not to have to rely on others:
"I want to be able to do things, sort of without asking someone else to help me."

"Marriage broke and I found a little bit more time on my hands so I decided to do several courses at tech... It improves the quality of life if you don't have a hang up about what you are putting on paper." (Leslie)

Like Leslie, a few members of the sample described changes in their lives which encouraged them to consider improving their literacy. Some women stated they were left with more time to think about their own interests and needs because their marriage broke up or because their children had grown up. Seva's husband was attending a course which left her with less to do:

"I was alone in the house, nothing to do, nothing on TV to pass my time and I thought I'd never been to school in this country and I saw the pamphlet in the letterbox."

"I would like to write a novel about my migrant parents... and me the little person in the middle being affected by it all." (Sarina)

Some, like Sarina, had a specific goal, a specific personal reason for wanting to improve their literacy ability. Mary stated she wanted to improve her reading so she could read knitting patterns. Others though often gave more general reasons such as simply wanting to read more.

"I need reading and writing so I can help my children." (Asuman)

Like Asuman, quite a few respondents wanted to improve their reading and writing for their children. Mary wanted to learn to read first and second grade books so she could read them to her children if she wanted to. John planned ahead. He wanted to improve his reading and writing now so that when he married and had children, he would be able to help them.

"My mum and dad sort of found out about the course and said 'you should go along to it'. I probably wouldn't have gone." (Theresa)

External encouragement of some type, and in particular from family and friends, was an important factor influencing some people to attend literacy classes. Philip for example, didn't think anything could be done about his literacy problems, but his girlfriend wanted him to try. Tony rang for help after he saw an encouraging advertisement on television. Amy was of the opinion that everyone who came into the country **had** to go to literacy classes.

Discussion

Reasons for participating in adult education are very complex. As already discussed in the literature review on different aspects of participation, stated reasons for leaving a programme, and therefore by inference, commencing a programme, may not necessarily be the "real" reason. It also depends on people's memories of the situation at the time, and one year after the event, especially if participation wasn't a successful learning experience and didn't last very long, recollections of why they participated in the first place may not be too clear. There may also be more than one reason. Jobs for example, are mentioned as an important factor by many in the sample, and presumably they are a convenient and 'acceptable' reason to cite, but at the same time there may be more personal reasons also, for example, to feel more comfortable with yourself, more confident, areas falling within the affective domain highlighted by Charnley and Jones in their British study in the 1970s. Further, Brennan et al (1989) also acknowledge the difficulty of categorising reasons for participating:

Behind the apparently straightforward goal of 'to learn to read and write' may lie a number of other goals or expectations unexpressed or unrecognised by the student. It is a question of trying to quantify what may be intense personal yearnings. (Brennan et al 1989, p.34)

Our response to this though is not to try to attempt to accurately quantify reasons for participating, or in fact to accurately quantify the other participatory aspects covered in this

study, other than to make some generalisations such as most or few, or more/less than half of the sample or similar terminology. As we explained in the introductory chapter, the essentially qualitative approach of this study and the selection of our interview sample, makes it unnecessary for us to be unduly concerned with percentages and hard data in our efforts to gain insights into this student population. Besides which, some issues such as reasons for participating are so complex and the data necessarily so interwoven, that we feel we would not be doing justice to our research sample to 'quantify' their responses in a detailed manner. Our intention is mainly to highlight the perspectives of the sample and thus identify the factors involved. It may be for other researchers to attempt to assess the relative importance of each of the factors we identify in a more quantifiable form.

The reasons for participation cited in this section correspond quite closely to other studies. The reasons highlighted here include: jobs and related to it, undertaking courses which lead to better jobs; the need for greater confidence and a better self image; personal interest and specific goals (eg write family history, understand knitting patterns); changed life circumstances (eg marriage break up); reading to children; and external pressures. All of these, with the exception perhaps of external pressures, can be accommodated within the reasons cited in the British study by Charnley and Jones (1978), the Victorian study by Coates & Sutherland (1984), and more recently the national Australian study by Brennan et al (1989).

EXPECTATIONS OF THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

'When you start at school first day, that's what I expect." (Tony)

Many participants expected the adult literacy classes to be like school basing their expectations on their own school experiences. Mary for example, thought it would be like school ... where I just copied from the board and did not learn anything.' Stephen similarly thought classes would be a matter of 'Here, write out this.' And Maria thought she might get 'picked on.

Theresa had come to the adult literacy programme soon after leaving school and thus was surprised to see so many older people in the class.

Gaby, presumably also with a school-based frame of reference, thought there would be more students in the class. Similarly, some felt that the classes would be more formal and structured. Phillipa for example, expected classes to have a strict programme of learning and a set book, whereas Jane thought there would be tests and exams.

'I thought I would start at the beginning. You know the 'abc' or something like this." (Mary)

Closely related to school expectations were expectations from several members of the sample that the adult literacy classes would start at the beginning, with for example, the alphabet. Mario assumed there was a system you could learn, and once you learnt the system you would be alright. Sarina thought it would be like learning basic English grammar from a book.

'I expected the class to be more advanced, less simple." (Nikolaus)

A few in the sample expected the classes to cater for a different level whether that be higher or lower. Some who expected the other students in the class to be more advanced than they were, were pleasantly surprised. Mary thought that because she hadn't started the class at the same time as the other students, the rest of the class would find things easier. Pedro also thought other students would be more advanced and had felt embarrassed about making a mistake.

Others were surprised that there were so many students who needed help with their spoken English.

I didn't think it would be as basic as that because I know how to speak English but there were people there that couldn't speak English properly." (David)

The corollary to this however were those who thought they would be learning spoken English in the literacy classes. Thien for example, a Vietnamese student, had the expectation that he would have a lot of practice in speaking and conversation in English, and this essentially was why he enrolled.

Discussion

By expectations we refer here to what the interview sample thought it would be like to learn in the ABE programme. In Brennan et al (1989) expectations are seen more in terms of the goals students expected to achieve through participating in the ABE programme.

Although only a short section, the expectations noted above in our interview sample are quite significant. We know from research in adult education by Boshier (1973) that 'congruence' between participants and their educational environment to a large extent determines persistence or drop-out in adult education programmes. Further, Darkenwald and Gavin (1987) show that drop-out in adult education has been associated with the discrepancy found between student expectations and the actual experience of the classroom environment. Clearly, from the few examples cited, a number of students had expectations which were likely to differ considerably from the actual ABE learning environment. Those who expected a 'school-like' environment in particular, would most likely have been surprised by what they found. And whilst it is easy for professional teachers and us as researchers to assume that the 'adult' and in consequence, the more informal environment of the ABE classroom, would be a pleasant surprise, we have to accept also that some students

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may not have wanted this, and in fact wanted instead what they expected, a more structured and 'school-like' environment. Unfortunately this area of initial student expectations seems to be unresearched in ABE.

We can also glean from comments made that some respondents thought they would start at the beginning, and would learn the 'system' of reading and writing in English. Here again, we can speculate that some of these students, especially if taught by a teacher with a more progressive 'whole language' literacy teaching philosophy, may have found their expectations not met by the actual ABE experience. They may also have found that progress was slower than expected and that the 'system' is in fact quite difficult to get to terms with.

Finally, and very significantly, students had different expectations about the essential nature of the language skills being taught. The issue here is one of appropriate assessment at the time of recruitment. Clearly there will be a clash of expectations if some students have very basic spoken and literacy skills in English and expect mainly to improve their spoken English, whilst others are relatively fluent in spoken English and wish mainly to improve their literacy skills. RAWFA classes are meant to cater for this latter student group. ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) and RAWFA represent two quite different teaching domains, and the mixing of the two in the same classroom is likely to lead to an unsatisfactory learning experience for many students. This may become more apparent in the later sections.

THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Having covered respondent expectations of the ABE learning experience, in this section we present their perspectives on what they actually found. Were they happy and satisfied with their experience in the programme (ie positive feelings) or were they dissatisfied, (negative feelings), and why? For each of the different factors mentioned in this section we cover first the positive perspectives and then the negative ones.

"I only really stayed with the class because I liked the teacher. I think when a person takes an interest in you it obviously brings out the best in you." (Sarina)

Most of the interview sample had something positive to say about their learning experience, and many of the reasons were related to the teacher. Like Sarina, Julie was pleased when a teacher took particular interest in her:

"The teacher spent a long time with me. She had more interest in me and wanted to help me more than the others did."

Other favourable comments about teachers abounded. Maria for example stated:

"They respected what I said and what I did. They gave you freedom of choice. If you don't want to do what they're doing, or read aloud, or if you want to sit on the computer, you can."

Of one particular teacher she stated:

"He knew what I disliked, what my interests were. He never, you know, he didn't .. he never thought like, um, I had to get my spelling right or anything. He would correct it really good. And when I write personal letters he just correct it. He let me write down what I thought, you know, how I would put it."

Teachers often were seen to be more than people whose job was just to teach reading and writing. Afat tries to explain her feelings:

"I feel they are really close to the person ... You don't feel they are just teacher... just teach you words or some subject about English. When they talk about a subject, like stress, they give you your time ... to talk, even sometimes you take your feelings out when you talk to someone else. The people there they know how to discuss things."

Therese appreciated the understanding on the part of her teacher:

"I think he's very polite. You know, sometime when you cannot understand something .. I think he something inside for teaching the people, no!"

Firouz, who left because he didn't like so many students in the class, or having students with such an age range (especially one student he claimed was about thirteen), nevertheless had a lot of regard for the interest his teacher took in him, even after he left the class:

"She writes the letters to me, 'why don't you come?' And she write 'I hope you don't be sick'. She was very kind."

Similarly Asuman describes his learning experience as:

"Excellent, excellent. They tried very hard to teach us. Doesn't matter if I made mistake, still they give me confidence."

For others in the sample, it was the informality, the fact that you could refer to teachers by their first name that impressed them.

There is another side to the coin though, but it seemed to affect no more than four or five in the sample. Julie for example, who is cited above providing positive comments about one teacher, unfortunately wasn't so happy about the lack of attention she received from other teachers. However, she realised she was a student with more ability than many of the other students and understood that the other students needed more attention.

Others weren't so understanding. Marc criticised those who were high school teachers, claiming that in the evening they were tired and they took it out on RAWFA students. Fillippa said some teachers were lazy. She expected the teacher to have a strict programme, and

she wanted dictation, neither of which her teacher would provide. Fillippa claimed the teachers talked too much and didn't set writing assignments.

Similarly Connie wanted teachers to find more fault with her, as her previous teachers had in another course:

"...they would give me work and with my errors they would point it out and they wouldn't say this is pretty good. But I found with this class, I believe my mistakes were just set aside, they weren't pointed to what I expected."

'We were like a family." (Pedro)

The relationship with other students in the group also had a positive effect. Pedro found all the students had similar problems to him which gave him some confidence. Similarly with Ken who was surprised given the diversity within the group:

"Talking to other people and seeing other people the same as I am, the same problems, and all different nationalities in the class and age. One was fifteen and all ages, and we all got on well. That surprised me."

The cooperative spirit, the group "we" feeling was strong for many students; ideas and problems were shared within the group:

"It was more or less, if you were stuck on something, everyone's doing the same thing, so you can sort of ask a question... Everyone shared ideas." (John)

"Everyone was friendly. If I couldn't understand a word and the teacher was busy, others help you. It was a good atmosphere." (James)

"..They wouldn't just let you work on your own, it'd be like the whole class. You'd be hearing each other's ideas on a particular subject ... found that pretty good to find out some other people's way of, what they were saying." (Dennis)

There weren't many negative views about other students. Some though, like Seva appeared somewhat disparaging in their reference to the level of ability of other students. Seva described them as "first grade". And just as some students enjoyed the "family" atmosphere of the class, other students such as Fillippa felt there was too much talking and too many coffee breaks.

'Every teacher has a different idea. They find a new way to teach." (Yvette)

Some students quite liked the change of teachers whereas others found it disruptive. Luis, like Yvette, enjoyed the change of styles:

"I changed three, four teachers.. I think they got different styles. I think it was good in a way .. the different styles, attitudes I think was better, otherwise we always keep working on the same thing."

Some were non-committal about different teachers and said it didn't matter, but others were more negative. James for example thought it was "silly" to have two different teachers on two nights a week. Firouz simply stated: "teacher must be the same". And Marie said one teacher would be sufficient:

"You get used to that person and you don't feel the same way you'd feel with the next teacher. You feel sort of funny, different."

"Sometimes we'd have a class of eight and sometimes we'd have a larger group..They (other students) need a lot more time than what she was able to give." (Dianne)

No former students were happy with a large class, and an excessive number of students in the class had a strong influence on their feelings about the learning experience generally. Kim claimed there were fifteen in the class "and the migrants needed a lot of help just with their speaking." Dimitri was frustrated at the waste of her time being in a large class where she couldn't get enough attention:

"I am surprised, they know they have so many people here. I understand the problem (for the teacher), but I felt like I'm losing my time there.. You just feel hopeless you know, when time goes by and you're sitting there."

Marie said the teacher recognised there were too many students in her class, and said the next time there would be two teachers. Philip said he couldn't get

settled, and that "I just didn't think enough time was spent with me .. I've got to have someone over my shoulder."

"It was more flexible, like it wasn't planned .. I think the course was nice I enjoyed it. It left me with nice feelings, didn't leave me with psychological scars." (Chris)

Chris perhaps exemplifies a satisfied customer. He appreciated the content and the teaching approach. For him there was certainly 'congruence' between his needs and what the programme offered. There were plenty of others. Peter, for example, a Greek man in his fifties was entirely happy: "It was beautiful. I wrote a couple of stories. Teacher very happy for me." Ken spoke enthusiastically of going outside the college for visits to different organisations, a visit to Canberra, and a visit to a T.V. studio:

"...and none of the organisations knocked us back. They all said we could come, once we said we were from TAFE and the teacher with us."

But not all the interview sample were so pleased with the content of classes or the approach to teaching offered. Dominic wanted "grammatical" work not computers; Fillippa wanted "dictation"; Amy wanted a "set system"; David wanted more conversation; Thien similarly wanted the teacher: "..to fix the way I speak". Marie simply "couldn't cope". Tony, for whom nothing went right, said the teacher gave him a "baby book" on the one and only night he attended. Jane found classes "boring - the same thing all the time."

For Mario progress was slow due partly it seems because he had the expectation that English was like Italian, that there was a system to master, and following this progress would be rapid:

"I think it was the system. Like in Italy you learn the verb and your alphabet, you're halfway there. (In English) even if you know the grammatical, the alphabet, you can't write or read anything because you don't write the way you talk."

For Maria there were positive and negative experiences. Already cited in this section are her positive views on the way teachers respected what she said and did, but nevertheless there were times when she was less than happy about particular assignments set in class:

"I could sit there, if it's something that I'm interested in, I could sit there and do it. If I'm not it'd be a bit hard. I hate when people catch me by surprise and say I want you to write the story of your life. It's the worst. It's like ... I'm seventeen and nothing happened exciting in my life...I'm not married and you know, if you tell me, write a story on floristry, and how you go about it, I'll say fine. I can write you three pages. But not my life story ... I was born such and such.."

Discussion

In this section on the interview respondent's feelings about the learning experience we have looked at the important role of the teacher, the role of fellow students, the effects of changes of teachers, feelings about class size, and finally, some aspects of lesson content and approaches to teaching literacy.

Relations between teachers and students seemed to be crucial to how the learning experience was viewed. Teachers generally were held in very high regard by the students; it was rare to find a teacher criticised. Rapport was often close and personal caring apparent. This close personal relationship and the informality of the teacher-student relationship must have contrasted to what some of the students expected from the ABE programme, given their school-oriented expectations expressed in the previous section.

How students got on with their fellow students would also appear to be a major factor determining their perceptions of the learning experience. Again, most comments were favourable, and the classes for many clearly had an important social as well as educational function. If students didn't have a good relationship with their teachers and if they didn't enjoy the company of their fellow students, then it was unlikely they would have a positive perspective on the learning experience, and this is without at this stage having any regard to what was actually taught or how much they learnt.

Changes of teachers are unfortunately a fact of life in AbE programmes as they are in many adult education programmes. As stated in the introductory section to this study, all evening college teachers are part time and a great many TAFE teachers are also. When positions are limited and teachers are chasing untenured employment in a range of institutions, all with different hours and timetables, it is inevitable that there will be quite a large turnover of teachers. What is surprising is that it didn't seem to adversely affect more of the sample. Although some disquieting objections to changes of teachers were cited, for many students this seemed something they could live with, and in fact turn to their advantage (different ideas, styles of teaching). Clearly though in an area such as adult literacy, where students may be anxious about their lack of ability and very aware of their previous failures, a large degree of trust may develop in a small literacy class, and frequent changes of teacher may make it very difficult to continue without some negative effects.

Class size **was** an important issue, and there were no advocates of large classes. So far in this study we have not found it necessary to make any distinction between students who attended the TAFE college and those who attended the evening college. Over this issue though we make an exception. TAFE colleges simply do not exceed the stipulated six-to-one teacher-student ratio, and whilst some of the former TAFE students in the interview sample did like the idea of receiving more individual attention, the issue of class size is really a matter related mainly to the evening college in this study. Class sizes seemed to fluctuate, and certainly at times when there were too many in the class, some students were unhappy and felt their time was wasted.

Approaches to teaching also seem a significant factor. Although there were satisfied customers, the ones who objected to the way they were taught had fairly strong expectations of what they wanted, and this didn't match what they received. A conflict of expectations and the actual teaching experience was apparent. Mainly it seemed to be a conflict for those who expected a stricter programme, a set literacy curriculum which involved traditional skill exercises in, for example, dictation and grammar. This may well reflect the expectation that adult literacy classes should be conducted in a way similar to how these students were taught when they were at school. The idea that students should informally discuss issues and read and write about things they found most relevant, ie a learner-centred approach, seemed to be at odds with demands to be taught the "system" in a fairly traditional way. The other area of conflict was between those students who essentially wanted to improve their spoken English, their pronunciation in English, and the **literacy** focus of the classes. Clearly for some NESB's with poor spoken English, the learning experience in RAWFA was unsatisfactory.

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OUTCOMES

This section covers what the interview respondents felt they got out of participating in the adult literacy programme as distinct from the previous section which considered how they felt about the learning experience.

Somewhat surprisingly, the vast majority of respondents felt their participation had a positive outcome. In fact of the total sample of sixty-eight, only nine (13%) felt they gained nothing from participating. These figures are surprising given that all respondents were *former* students, many of whom would accept the label 'drop-out' in relation to their previous participation in the adult literacy programme. Covered here are the range of positive outcomes followed by some short comments from those with negative outcomes.

'I feel better in myself' (Leslie)

Personal confidence was the most frequently cited outcome of the literacy classes. It was rarely mentioned in isolation though. People had more confidence in themselves to do other things such as doing another course or getting a better job.

Maria felt she was better at her job as a florist and she also made the rather insightful statement that:

"I never used to go out a lot. Now I can walk out on the streets on my own and no one's going to be staring at me."

She also felt that her opinion was more important because in the literacy classes she was asked her opinion on different things, thus she felt better about herself, she had a better self image. Ken also felt that his shyness decreased and this helped him to speak more to people:

"I talk too much now they reckon. I've gone the other way."

Theresa's self confidence came out in her not being afraid to make mistakes anymore in front of other people:

"I wouldn't read in front of the kids at school, but, you know in these classes I will read in front of the class and if I make a mistake it doesn't matter because they all make mistakes anyway."

Leslie's comments similarly reflected growing confidence and a decrease in the "fears" of not being sufficiently literate:

"It was gaining that little bit of confidence to live a better lifestyle ... You don't feel isolated as much. You don't have the fear that you're going to write something down and it's spelt wrong."

'If I wasn't able to read and write I would never be able to do the computer course." (Chris)

Some felt that with better reading and writing skills and more confidence they were better equipped to do other courses. Some went on to the full time Certificate in Adult Basic Education (CABE) course available in some TAFE colleges and then on to other courses. Maria gained her Florist Certificate and Tanya got into her Childcare course.

"My boss at work had to fill in a lot of things to keep me going in the job and now he don't have to come near me." (Ken)

Improved literacy abilities often led to an improvement in job performance. David for example needed to write messages at work and now felt more competent. Sadeh thought that the literacy class was instrumental in her getting a job at the library. Asuman's goal was to become a social worker:

"I like to become qualified. I don't want to stay the same level. I like to work social worker but I still never come up to this level. But one day I will. That's my goal."

In some cases therefore greater confidence in their abilities to achieve led to a raising of their job expectations. A corollary to this however, and it's difficult to know whether this constitutes a positive or a negative outcome, is that raising expectations can lead to dissatisfaction with current life circumstances. Gaby for example, left the literacy class to take on a second job

because he needed the money, but doing so left him dispirited:

"I feel stupid because I was doing something good .. learning something. Now what am I doing? Nothing, I am 'kebab man'."

"I found out there were other people like me. I wasn't the only one." (Chris)

An important outcome for at least some of the interview sample was the realisation that others have similar problems, and that the feelings of personal failure possibly internalised over many years, seemed to be less significant in the light of knowledge that others shared similar problems, that it wasn't just them. There were also others like Nikolaus who were made to feel better in the knowledge that they were in fact more competent in literacy than many others. The problems they may have thought serious paled in comparison to some other students "especially those who have been here thirty years."

Specific examples of gains or improvements in literacy related areas of their lives abound. Suba said she could "speak more"; Amy could "figure out" spelling; Fillippa learnt to use a dictionary; Yvette can now write letters and notes to her children; Stephen stated his handwriting had improved; and Mario could read the bible and put a small story together. Mary no longer has problems with knitting patterns:

"I am actually knitting something for the baby now .. I've been doing it by myself. Before I used to ask my daughter-in-law."

John explained how he can now "get into" literacy related tasks:

"If I wasn't getting anything out of it, if I didn't enjoy it, I would've stopped after the first few weeks. I was benefitting from it, that's why I kept going. It's easier to get a newspaper or any book and read it, whereas before if you come up with a few words or something, and you know, you're just lost... Now it's different, you get into it."

Finally in this section, we need to look at those few respondents who didn't achieve a positive outcome. As indicated before there were only nine in the whole sample who fell within this category. Some in fact only participated a couple of nights before deciding it wasn't for them. Interestingly four respondents very clearly accepted full resposibility for not achieving a positive outcome (ie in relation to locus of control, they are 'internals' as opposed to 'externals' who see other factors than themselves as responsible for their condition). Connie for example stated she didn't think she learnt much at all:

"...but I really honestly have to say that it was my fault, because I don't think one night a week helps. I put more concentration on my typing because it was a certificate course rather than the English."

Philip similarly stated:

"It's got nothing to do with the course, it's just me.. I was wasting their time."

In the case of Maria, the work was too hard, and she couldn't cope ("It's more my fault"). Whether the programme was at fault or not, these students seemed to have internalised their failure. This wasn't always the case though. Guisseppe for example (who was also doing his Masters degree in Engineering), simply didn't put in the work.

Discussion

The findings presented in this section correspond in many ways to others which have looked at the outcomes of adult literacy programmes. The most recent Australian study by Brennan et al (1989) found, like this study, that the great majority of students had achieved a positive outcome. The significant factor identified by them, and following on from the findings of Grant (1987) and overseas studies by Charnley and Jones (1979) and Darkenwald and Valentine (1985), was the increase in student confidence resulting from participation. Brennan et al chose to use the same generic framework for categorising outcomes as Charnley and Jones (ie affective personal, cognitive, enactive, socio-economic and affective social achievement), and found, like Charnley and Jones, that affective personal achievement featured strongly. In our study though we have some difficulty in categorising our interview responses

within those identified by Charnley and Jones. Clearly from our findings an increase in confidence was the single dominant outcome, but this would appear to be bound up integrally with the other outcome categories such as socio-economic or cognitive, and it doesn't seem appropriate for example, to distinguish between a general outcome of feeling better about oneself, and feeling better about getting a better job, or simply being able to now spell or write better, or being able to read a knitting pattern. Significantly, even in the Brennan et al (1989) study with its greater quantitative emphasis, there was the acknowledgement that there are difficulties in categorising outcome responses.

> *..the highly personal nature of participants' hoped-for outcomes and the inter-relatedness of these outcomes often made the categorisation difficult..* (p.67)

It is worth recounting here that our interview sample had all recently left the adult literacy programme, and as the previous section indicated and the next section will confirm, not all the interview sample were happy with their learning experience, and yet despite this almost without exception they claimed to have achieved positive outcomes from participating. And of the small number who didn't, several of these saw themselves entirely to blame. This last factor is hardly surprising though given the often stated low self-esteem that characterises many adult literacy students.

REASONS FOR LEAVING

This section comprises two main parts. In the first part we look at 'classroom-related' factors, that is, factors to do with pedagogy, teacher-student relationship factors seen by the interview sample as responsible for them leaving the ABE programme. In the second part we look at 'non-classroom' factors seen to be responsible. As outlined in the previous chapter, other Australian studies have used different terminology to refer to these two sets of reasons, for example, 'non-personal' and 'personal' (Council of Adult Education 1977) or 'course' reasons and 'structural/personal' reasons (Kessler 1984).

Classroom-related reasons for leaving

Clearly there will be an overlap in this section with some of the negative learning experiences expressed earlier. We think it appropriate to assume that negative learning experiences will play a major role in determining reasons for leaving, though they may not provide the total picture.

"They said: 'We don't really think your needs fit this class'." (Dianne)

Inappropriate placement seemed to be a major factor causing some students to leave the ABE programme. Often students were either too 'basic', and in particular this applies to students whose primary educational needs related to their spoken English rather than literacy, or they were students who had an ability range way above the rest of the class. As an example of the former group, Maria was illiterate in her own language, Italian, and just found it too difficult to undertake writing tasks. Similarly Denis couldn't cope. He stated: "I felt out completely ... like I was just sitting there listening to them and I couldn't contribute.." In Yvette's case her spoken English was poor and she was advised by the teacher to join an ESOL class instead:

"The teacher she said to me more the language classes... She said it was up to me, but she feel be better for me if I try a little bit ... I can come back about the other."

At the other extreme there was Dianne who left because she also received a phone call from the teacher, but in this case requesting that she no longer participate due to her higher ability level:

"I could understand when they said 'look you know, we really don't think your needs fit this class.' Fair enough I understand that, there were other people who had greater needs .. I would've kept going .. but I could understand their point of view."

Similarly Julie left following a phone call from her teacher in which it was suggested that Julie was too advanced and that she should perhaps try a Work Opportunities for Women (WOW) course instead.

Seva also left partly because she considered her literacy skills were so much better than the rest of the class:

"All the students were very very novice or something and they did not know anything. They could not make a sentence in English and every time the teacher told them to write essay they could not finish one single sentence because they were so novice in English."

Seva had already received a good grounding in written English in her native country India.

"In our country they give more stress on writing. In any subject we have to write, write .. I could have written three, four pages and expressed myself better than what I am speaking now and all the students they could not make difference 'she' and 'he'."

Pat felt she was "infringing" on the time of others due to her more advanced literacy abilities:

"...people were learning to speak English and phrases and some of them could hardly speak English. I was infringing on their time, and I sort of dropped out."

In the case of Guiseppe, he already had a bachelor's degree and was undertaking his master's degree (in Engineering) and

felt the need to brush up on his written English. He was aware that his needs differed considerably from other students:

"A lot of people came in from overseas .. None were of my experience. Someone ask 'you got a degree and you come to school to learn English.' They were surprised."

Guiseppe, Seva and a number of others in the interview sample certainly had literacy needs, but they were more advanced literacy needs, or at least more specific than could be accommodated within a regular RAWFA class. But then again, perhaps it was the inappropriate placement of so many NESB students with basic oral problems in English that was the major placement problem, not those with more advanced literacy abilities.

"Too many people was in the class.." (Firouz)

Not many of the interview sample specifically cited large classes as **the** reason for them leaving, but it seems to have been a contributing factor. Marie for example claimed as a reason for leaving: "the classes got bigger and I felt embarrassed about saying things in front of people", but then some time later she added "just that it was too far away", and then further stated, "I thought they knew more than me. I don't know why, I just did. I thought 'what are they in here for?' you know what I mean?" For Marie therefore a number of factors could have caused her to leave the class, one of which was a large class size. Similarly with Firouz who stated "too many people was in the class", but he also acknowledged that different ages within the class bothered him (particularly one student whom he considered to be only twelve or thirteen), and that shift work actually prevented him from continuing with the programme. Firouz it seems wasn't so much referring to the teacher-student ratio being high, but actually having two classes operating in the same classroom:

"You know the problem of the class only was the many students and this one was not good...And the first time we go to the class, two class was in one class.. Our teacher said, 'Be quiet and don't make noise for another class'."

Sarina made the point that the teacher was unable to maintain the close working relationship they had previously had due to an increase in the class size, and this was the major factor causing her to leave:

"The first term there weren't many in the class, I think there were only about three or four of us. On some days you would only get two turning up, and on other days you would get three or four. Helen (teacher) had the time for me .. But then the second term she got a lot of migrant people and they really did need her help a lot more than I needed. I had mentioned to Helen that I wanted to do creative writing and she encouraged me to go ahead and join up on that one."

Dimitri also certainly left in part due to too many in the class, but this seems to be tied in with general frustrations with the different ability levels of students and not getting enough individual attention:

"It's very unfair for the person who is teaching there when you have fifteen, sixteen (students). I just say to you, it doesn't focus the problem really, you know. .. it takes too much time, especially when there were some people there that couldn't speak (English). So they normally have to spend more time with them."

Tony, a twenty-two year old Lebanese student didn't like anything about the classes. He only stayed for a couple of sessions and it's difficult to specify the main reason why he left the programme, but it's significant that he also makes reference to fifteen in the class (and also that "they were all old"). However, he also may have been referring to the combined class (two in the one classroom) which Farouz referred to earlier.

For other students though, nothing short of individual one-to-one tuition was wanted, regardless of the class size. Tony for example, left because he wasn't getting enough individual attention:

"Well the teacher had too much to do I reckon, too many people to teach. Like, if you got to try and teach four people you got to keep jumping from one to the other and you're not teaching them. If I had a lot of money I would get a teacher to individually teach me. I'm not saying the

teacher wasn't good, there were just too many people in the class."

I actually had two different teachers. Well it affected my attitude. I think when you become used to one teacher you become relaxed and not uptight with them. .. and then you've got to go through all that again. (Leslie)

Generally adult literacy students don't like changes of teachers. However, only three or four members of the interview sample stated that this was a factor causing them to leave the ABE programme. Even Leslie (quoted above), whilst he didn't particularly like a change of teachers, and it contributed to him leaving, it wasn't the main reason (he cited shift work instead). Similarly with James, who was cited earlier in the learning experience section as saying it was "silly" to have two different teachers for the two classes each week. He claimed though that he left because he had learnt enough and that he no longer had the time.

For Dominic, though, a seventy year old Italian, a change of teacher was the main factor causing him to leave. He was very pleased with his first teacher, but as he stated, "when she left I go". It appears that the new teacher wanted Dominic to try some work on the computer, which Dominic wasn't interested in: "Why do I have to go on the computer? At my age, seventy. That's why I left."

Dianne, whilst she didn't cite changes of teacher as her main reason for leaving (as explained before, she was requested to leave because her literacy ability was so much better than the rest of the class), she does provide some insight into the effect of a change of teacher. She had three teachers in the space of six months:

"It makes it difficult, they are all very good, don't get me wrong, they are excellent, but they all thought differently. Well, every time a new teacher started we had to write and tell them exactly what we did and that was like one whole class gone. And when one teacher was getting to know where your difficulties were she had to leave somewhere else and another one came along so that was the difficult part about it."

Similarly Phillip makes the point that just as he started to get some confidence with a teacher, that teacher left:

"I just think someone gets confidence in someone, that's what happened with me, and then someone else comes along. That's what happened to a certain stage at school. I'd get confidence in a particular teacher, and then we'd have a new teacher, and I was back to square one."

"The classes were not what I wanted. I wanted more conversation." (David)

The lesson content caused some students to leave. As indicated earlier in the learning experience section, many former students, being NESB and having limited spoken abilities in English, wanted primarily to improve their spoken English. They wanted conversation classes in English and found some frustration in working primarily on literacy activities. Semioti, an Indonesian for example, left because the teacher spoke too quickly and she couldn't understand what the teacher was saying. By the same token though, some left precisely because the focus in the class seemed to be rather 'basic' and probably stressed aspects of spoken English at the expense of reading and writing. David (another David), of native English speaking background stated:

"The class did not really suit my needs. It was a bit basic. More for people who knew no English."

Several in the sample left because they appeared not to appreciate a "learner-centred" approach to improving their literacy abilities. As indicated earlier, they expected a "curriculum", a set programme. They didn't like the idea that you "do whatever you like" as Fillipa claimed. Amy, a Singaporean, wanted a set "system" with specific tasks. She didn't like the general nature of the class. She wanted a class "about sounds and symbols". She wanted to know in advance what was going to be covered in class so that she would know whether it was worth turning up that night or not.

Others simply claimed their progress wasn't fast enough and they left because it wasn't really worth the time and

sacrifices they were making. Philip for example stated:

"It was a real effort to go up there. I just didn't think I was getting anything out of it. I was probably expecting too much. Probably expect everything to be, you know, perfect, just like that. "

Non-classroom reasons for leaving

The only reason I dropped out was the twenty four hour shift work. Shift work was the biggest disadvantage... trying to get people to exchange shifts with you so that you can attend classes. (Leslie)

Close to one third of the interview sample cited reasons related to employment as a factor in their decision to leave the ABE programme. They included: taking on new jobs with different work hours, taking on a second job, working in new locations which meant access to classes was now difficult, and shift work in particular meant that evening classes were often out of the question. One woman left ostensibly to look after her husband's surgery, to cover for phone calls and enquiries. Another was an assistant manager who claimed he worked sixty hours a week. Again it is difficult to determine the relative importance of these reasons. Of course for many it was the major reason for them leaving the class. But for others there is often the suspicion that it provided a convenient reason, because they weren't particularly happy anyway with the way the classes were going. The following examples illustrate this:

"At the time I got a new job which was working at night so that made it a bit hard for me. I also slackened off. I just didn't go back. I needed to know bigger things than the people who were there. They held me back." (Joe)

"I began a night job and couldn't go to class, I didn't have time. The classes were really not what I wanted. I wanted more conversation." (David)

"Maybe because I'm working now..sometimes on the weekends, sometimes during the week. I'm casual worker. Because of the work and because it was a little slow for me too." (Marcella)

In Theresa's case it was simply tiredness from working and trying to manage other aspects of her family's life that caused her to leave:

"This year I stopped school because I nearly got an accident. I sleep when I drive on the way ... I can't sleep so much, four hours ... Work, and go to school ... having kids. For that I stop because I cannot stop working."

"Because my children at home they need me." (Asuman)

Family circumstances caused a number of the interview sample to leave classes. About a dozen, mostly women, cited family factors. Domingas for example, left to have a baby. Marie left due to commitments such as cooking for the family, and Mary had to prepare for her daughter's wedding. Certainly young children were a major factor. One woman left because her mother died and she then had to wait until her son reached school age before she could think about returning to class. Several simply couldn't leave their children at home at night. Asuman for example, felt that her children came first, they might need help with homework: "that's why I couldn't do it at night time .. They need more qualifications, more than me."

Kristina's case was particularly distressing. Her husband didn't want her to go to classes, and it seems he succeeded in preventing her:

"He doesn't want me to go anywhere. He thinks I'm not going to go at all this year ... because I haven't resumed this year, because the first term, the first week, he started going to supposedly have his teeth fixed at night. He did the same last year. He started going every Wednesday night to get his teeth fixed. He wouldn't come home till 8.30 and I couldn't leave my children...Frustrating, but you just have to go on... My husband goes out to the races at night and of course I can't leave the children, and Thursday night you know, we have to go shopping with the children or whatever, so it makes it a bit hard."

"At the time I left I was doing another course, it was full time, five days a week, four hours a day, and I thought I was getting enough English by then." (Chris)

At least twelve of the interview sample left directly to go on to other courses. The courses varied a lot. Three specifically mentioned the CABE (Certificate in Adult Basic Education) course available at some TAFE colleges. This is a full time course designed to prepare students to enter and cope with more formal education courses, and is a logical next step onwards from RAWFA classes. It especially suited those who wanted a more intensive basic literacy course. Pedro for example claimed:

"Two days wasn't that good you know. You had two days there and then you had three days off or four, you know. By the time you got back there again, you forgot everything."

More advanced RAWFA students sometimes were referred on to other courses more likely to develop their literacy skills, such as a creative writing course or School Certificate equivalent courses. Some NESB students were referred on to ESOL classes. One student chose to undertake a speed typing course instead of RAWFA. Another took on a word processing course.

"My kids been sick for a while ... hepatitis ... Another had chest problems and I decided not to leave them. After that I got sick." (Afat)

Health reasons did feature as a reason for leaving, but not prominently. Only three or four saw health factors as the main reason. Roma for example, had an operation on her legs which prevented her continuing. Julie stated that she wasn't very stable at the time, and that both she and her fiance "had a lot of mental illness" that caused her to leave the classes.

"It was too far to go.. It was very dark at night and the lights in the street weren't on properly. " (Marie)

The final reason some gave for leaving the programme was to do with more general situational factors such as the college being inconvenient to get to, that it was too dark and late when classes finished. There were no more than six or seven who cited these reasons and they were usually cited in addition to dissatisfaction with some other aspects of the programme. One former student Kim, stated that she gave up because she was heavily involved in athletics which took up a lot of her spare time.

"Tm returning this term." (Kristine)

A very important factor to be considered before concluding this section is that whilst the interview sample were interviewed as *former* students, for quite a few of them, their absence from classes was considered temporary only (this was a finding in Mallise's 1986 study also). Moreover, some didn't consider they had actually left, even though they hadn't attended for a while. At least twelve of the sample fully intended to return or had already returned to ABE classes. Reasons for this temporary absence varied. Tanya and John went overseas to Italy for a while before returning to Australia; Semioti went back to Indonesia for a holiday; and John simply went on a holiday to Queensland. Two students, Lou Lou and Roma were still in RAWFA classes, but in other colleges, mainly because they were more convenient to get to. Mary was soon to return following her daughter's wedding which required two and a half months preparation, and Jane had now gone back following her son reaching school age, giving her the time through the day to attend. Kristine (whose husband went to "get his teeth fixed" on her class nights) was adamant she would return "this term" despite the fact that her husband was hoping she would stop.

Discussion

Quite a number of factors have been identified in this section as reasons for leaving the ABE programme. Classroom related factors (pedagogical factors) include: the programme not meeting the ability levels of students, excessive class sizes, changes of teachers, and dissatisfaction with lesson content. Non-classroom "(non-pedagogical) factors include: clashes with work, family circumstances, changes to other courses, health and other situational-type factors (eg too far to go, classes too late at night).

The great difficulty here, and it has been alluded to earlier in this study, is the accuracy of respondent perspectives. For example, one third of the sample cited job related reasons for leaving, which

perhaps isn't surprising given that about half the sample cited employment-related reasons for participating in the first place, but were these reasons the most important reasons? We suggest that for many they were not, as we indicated earlier (p.14). We don't deny that job related reasons are valid for many in the sample, and would constitute for them the most important and the single reason for them leaving the ABE programme. Clearly if a person gets a job with different work hours (especially shift work) or a different work location, then it may be impossible to continue with classes. However, we are mindful of research into drop-out in adult education that has indicated the likely greater importance of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the educational programme, and factors generally associated with the learning environment (see Boshier 1973; Anderson & Darkenwald 1979; Darkenwald 1981; Darkenwald & Gavin 1987). When we look closely at interview sample responses we often find that job related or general situational factors (eg too far to travel) present as an initial reason for leaving, but are followed by expressions of some dissatisfaction with the ABE programme. For example, they may not have progressed at the rate they expected, the ability 'level' of the classes may not have been appropriate to their individual needs, or their expectations of what learning would be like were not met (eg no set curriculum or set textbooks). As a consequence we are inclined to give greater priority to classroom related reasons for leaving, though we make it quite clear that non-classroom factors will also play a major part for many people. For many women especially, we were made aware of the difficulty for them of trying to juggle work and family responsibilities, especially involving child care, with getting to class. For example, it was only when Theresa fell asleep at the wheel that she realised she could no longer combine these responsibilities with her education. Kristine's 'competition' with her husband from a relatively weaker position also made her continuing participation extremely difficult. We thus accept that for many in our sample there were "conflicting pressures of work and domestic responsibility" as Kessler (1984) found with her migrant sample, though we believe that on balance, classroom related factors are of greater importance. An encouraging factor that we do recognise though is the determination of many in the sample who do suffer these conflicts to resolve them and to return to the ABE programme. It is difficult for example, not to believe that Kristine won't overcome the odds and, as she stated, return to class.

IMPROVEMENTS TO ABE PROGRAMMES

This section looks at what the interview sample consider is needed to improve ABE programmes. Necessarily there is some overlap here with the negative learning experiences and reasons for leaving stated earlier, and in consequence there are few surprises. Suggested improvements focussed mainly on either the structure of ABE programmes, for example, improvements in the timetabling of ABE classes, more (or less) time for classroom sessions each week, or less people in the class, or they focussed on curriculum type issues such as how they should be taught and what they should be taught.

"I don't want to have the feeling that I'm part of the furniture, just to be ignored." (Julie)

Julie's comments were said in the context of there being too many students in the class. Put simply, students wanted more individual attention which could only really be accomplished through smaller class sizes. Already this issue has featured prominently as a factor affecting the learning experience and reason for leaving for several members in the sample.

"More equal ability" (Marc)

At least as frequently cited an improvement was the need for a more homogeneous grouping of students. The focus here is very much one of separating the ESOL students from the RAWFA students. Kim for example, suggested the need to:

"...separate migrants from the English speaking because they have different needs."

And Dianne stated:

"I think they should have classes for the people who ... only been in Australia six months and was trying to learn to speak English."

Seva thought that when students were initially interviewed they should be graded according to ability levels.

Others saw age groupings as a matter of concern. Theresa for example, thought students should be around the same age because she felt inhibited about expressing her views. Firouz, who we have already mentioned in a previous section, didn't like the idea of working alongside one young student whom he considered was only twelve or thirteen years of age.

"The teacher was saying 'it's time to go' and I say 'wait it isn't two hours'." (Kristine)

Several members of the sample felt class times weren't long enough. Luis for example, wanted either longer class times or classes held three times a week instead of two. Peter wanted four hour classes and Asuman wanted a full time course. At the opposite extreme though was Theresa who thought three hours was too long:

"If you've been working all day you are really wrecked ... three hours too long."

There are a number of issues here though. The length of class time wanted would appear to depend on whether people were employed or not, and when. It also depends on whether the former students were attending a day or evening class. Those who attended during the day may well have had the time to spare. Evening classes following a full day's work though might present more problems to some people as it certainly did for Theresa. We also have to acknowledge that TAFE and evening colleges may have different class times. TAFE RAWFA classes are all a standard three hours, whilst the evening college in question in this study provided two-hour class times.

Somewhat related to the class time issue is Rex's suggested improvement to "..make the tea time a bit shorter". (Most RAWFA classes have a break mid way through the session).

In addition to the above improvements, there were comments about no changes in teachers, and some who didn't know, didn't care, or who simply thought it was up to the teachers to decide on programme improvements.

"I can't understand why they don't do grammar." (Guiseppe)

On to more 'curriculum' type issues, there were a range of things that the interview sample wanted to see improved, many relating to the expectations mentioned early in this chapter for a more formal or traditional teaching pedagogy. Bertha for example wanted "more dictation"; Fillipa wanted a set programme "not 'do what you like', I could've done that at home"; Amy wanted a set system so that she would know in advance what they were going to do; and Connie felt her mistakes were "just set aside". Others wanted more homework, more reading as a group to increase confidence (or destroy it!), spelling tests, more writing than reading and teachers to be firmer with students.

The different needs of students in relation to their oral proficiency in English also became apparent. There were those who wanted more conversation in class (several similar comments were made), more pronunciation in particular, "laboratory" work and the use of headphones.

Apart from the above improvements there were some less frequently cited ones, such as the need for more people to benefit from the classes ("I would like to see more Greek women going to class" - Kristine), and better facilities. Stephen for example claimed the building was old and cold in winter.

Discussion

As indicated there were no surprises given that many of these improvements mentioned correspond to the way students felt about their learning experience or why they left the programme. For this reason this section has been covered rather briefy.

Some improvements it would seem, could well be accommodated by both TAFE and evening colleges, and would presumably help to retain some students in the ABE programme. Small classes certainly are a pre-requisite for the success of this type of literacy programme. Ensuring, through stricter assessment at the time of initial enrolment or before, that all students in RAWFA classes fit the criteria for entry to the programme should not be too difficult either. However, the point needs to be stressed that this issue is one of separating ESOL from RAWFA students, not separating NESB from native English speaking students. It was made clear in the literature review that a high proportion of students in ABE programmes are NESB. Some comments made by members of the interview sample in this section may well reflect their personal prejudices against NESB migrants rather than concern to improve ABE provision.

'Curriculum' issues present a different story. Many ABE teachers are criticised for teaching in a 'traditional' structured way, relying heavily on standard texts and worksheets full of grammar-type exercises. But increasingly as ABE becomes more professionalised and more graduates of specific ABE teacher training courses become available, there will be less reliance on these teaching methods. Ironically though, as we have seen, quite a few students have the expectation that this is how they will be taught, and show dissatisfaction with ABE programmes because they don't receive this type of teaching, and they may in consequence leave. This is a dilemma for teachers which is taken up again in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

It remains in this final chapter to highlight some of the more significant findings in this study and to examine their implications for ABE programmes in NSW. However, before doing so we need to remind readers of the local context of this study, and to warn against inappropriate generalisations to other contexts. This study was after all based on former student perspectives from ABE programmes in just one TAFE college and one evening college. By the same token though, we are fairly confident that we have chosen two well regarded, perhaps even exemplary, ABE programmes from both TAFE and the Board of Adult Education, given the support we received from their head office staff to conduct the study.

We also wish to state again that our study focusses on former ABE students not colleges, even though our findings may have implications for college ABE provision. For the greater part of this study we have made no distinction between the former students from either the TAFE or the evening college. This is not to say that differences do not exist or that one organisation doesn't provide a better service than the other. But it is to say that our study was not designed to compare colleges and thus make comparative evaluations of educational systems. On only one aspect of provision, that of class size, is a distinction made between students from either of the two colleges, and we believe we are justified in doing so due to the effect this had on the learning experience of our interview sample. We are particularly mindful not to extend beyond our student focus and to see more than our study was intended to show in view of the politically sensitive ABE restructuring climate in NSW at the time of the release of this study. Already we hear of interpretations of the findings of the adult literacy outcomes study by Brennan et al (1989) used to serve particular interests which the authors probably did not intend.

Positive outcomes

Possibly the most significant findings in our study relate to positive outcomes. That so many in the interview sample could state they had benefited from the ABE learning experience appears remarkable given the propensity for negative responses expected from a former student sample, many of whom would accept that they 'dropped-out'. Positive outcomes were also a major finding in the Brennan et al (1989) study. In a sense therefore this study supports, from the students' point of view, ABE programmes. Whilst the data presented in this study may not satisfy educational bureaucrats who are looking for hard data on ABE outcomes, there can be little doubt from the point of view of most former students interviewed, that there were many beneficial outcomes.

Confidence: the necessary pre-condition

It seems almost repetitive to state that another major finding of this study is that many former students viewed increased confidence as their major outcome from participating in the ABE programme. It's repetitive because other adult literacy studies focussing on outcomes often reach the same conclusion, as was indicated in the literature review. We found though that confidence per se was not so much cited, but rather it was confidence associated with particular activities. Former students felt more confident in their job performance or in their ability to achieve particular things, even if it was just to be able to read a knitting pattern unaided.

Darkenwald and Valentine (1985) make the point that the inflated role of affective factors as outcomes of ABE programmes found in their study has implications for other ABE programmes which are increasingly being established for the attainment of strictly vocational goals. They found from their students'

perspectives, that increased confidence rather than jobs was the main outcome, and that educational programmers may have to think again before embarking on strictly vocational ABE programmes. To an extent we share these concerns. The 'new vocationalism' is taking hold in Australia just as it is in the United States context of Darkenwald and Valentine's study. In our study employment-related reasons were in fact cited most often by our interview sample for participating in the ABE programme, but appeared to be less often cited as an outcome. Admittedley the qualitative nature of our findings makes it difficult to make definitive judgements, but then the complex interrelationship of factors that goes to explain participatory behaviour in ABE programmes would make it difficult to determine by any measure. Our conclusion is that students cite employment-related reasons for participating not only because in many cases they really do have this as their major motive, but also because it's acceptable and expected. How many people for example would state that they participated because they felt bad about themselves and wanted a better self image?

On the basis of our findings therefore, we also warn against the development of more focussed vocationally-based ABE programmes if they are to be at the expense of the more general ABE programmes such as those featured in this study. We wish to make it clear though we are not referring here to 'workplace' literacy programmes which are of necessity, vocational, and are based essentially on the needs of workers within the workplace. The fact is that RAWFA programmes are based on the individual needs of students as expressed by students. By the same token, many former participants claimed to have vocational motives for participating, and no doubt worked towards these ends during their period of participation. One of the main outcomes for students was the **confidence to do things, including perform better in their jobs.** It may therefore be a false dichotomy to speak of vocational vs more general (some people prefer the term 'community') literacy programmes and not appropriate to separate them, as in a very real sense RAWFA programmes **are** vocational (see Campbell 1989). More confident people, who may for example, go on to undertake further education courses, will also be likely to find themselves in a better position for future employment. Even those who did not express vocational motives for participating may in the long term be better skilled and thus in a better employment position. For example, many of the women in the sample who were overburdened with family responsibilities, with greater confidence in their abilities their potential for work outside the home in the longer term can be increased considerably.

Just as Jones & Charnley (1978, p.110) perceived "access of confidence" as "basic to any advance in the skills of reading and writing", we consider this newly acquired confidence gained from ABE participation to be a pre-condition to greater participation generally in society, including employment. Our understanding of our interview sample perspectives is that their ABE learning outcomes have led many of them to take a more active and constructive role in running their lives, that they have more control, or are seeking more control, over their lives and they are moving forward not stagnating. It didn't take a specific 'vocational' programme to bring about these changes, but a more general ABE programme based essentially on individual student needs.

Expectations and the reality of ABE programmes

It was clear that many in the sample had particular expectations of the ABE programme that were not realised in practice. Perhaps in many cases this was a good thing. It's presumably a good thing that classes didn't replicate a schooling experience with a more structured and disciplined pedagogy. Nevertheless, whilst some of the interview sample may have been pleasantly surprised by the adult and thus more informal approach to teaching, others had more traditional expectations which caused them frustration. There were those for example, who wanted grammar exercises and a systematic structure to becoming more literate. Many of these students may have experienced a more formal and structured education in their own country of birth and were unacustomed to the informality and learner-centred approach characterising 'good practice' in adult literacy teaching. This conflict

between expectations and the reality of ABE programmes was a direct reason why some students left the programme.

There is no clear answer to this conflict. However, there may be the need for teachers to be more aware of the expectations of some of their students, and for students to have a greater understanding of the philosophy of a learner-centred ABE approach to teaching. These students with more traditional expectations appeared to simply leave the programme apparently disappointed and with no greater understanding of why they didn't get what they wanted. Teachers it would seem, though they may be confident in their chosen ABE pedagogy, might need to spend more time explaining it to students.

Assessment and placement

An additional criticism students made of their ABE learning experience, and another major reason why students left the programme, was the disparate range of ability levels and needs of students. In many respects it is quite appropriate that the literacy needs and abilities of students should be diverse, but the major issue here seems to be the conflict between the needs of mainly NESB students with low oral proficiency in English who want to improve their spoken English proficiency, and those students with basic literacy needs. In many cases it seems students were inappropriately placed in the RAWFA classes, and should instead have been in ESOL classes. There are problems involved in these placements. Sometimes it isn't too clear quite where a student fits, and there is certainly a 'grey' area for placement involving many NESB students. But clearly the oral proficiency in English of some students in the RAWFA classes was so low as to affect the operation of the class for other more appropriately placed RAWFA students. Students with low oral proficiency in English often seem to require more intensive attention from the teacher, leaving less time for other students.

From the comments made by the interview sample, RAWFA programmes require more stringent assessment and placement of students. Whilst no one likes to turn students away, students who do not meet the criteria for entry to RAWFA classes, especially those with spoken English needs, may be better off receiving no tuition than experiencing a frustrating and unsatisfying period of participation in a RAWFA class. It is certainly to the advantage of 'genuine' RAWFA students that entry to the programme be monitored closely. It is not appropriate that students be accepted to a RAWFA class simply due to the non-availability of more appropriate ESOL classes.

Class sizes

The point has already been made that TAFE RAWFA classes do not exceed a student-teacher ratio of six to one. Although there were a couple of disquieting comments made by ex-TAFE RAWFA students about insufficient individualised tuition with the teacher, for the most part class sizes which become excessive and raised objections from students, and actually caused some to leave, were mainly a problem in the evening college. Details are a little unclear, but it appears from the recollections of some students that two classes were combined in the one classroom, with two teachers. In actual fact the class size may not have been excessive if there were two teachers present, and in many TAFE ABE sections this is standard practice also, but certainly there was the **perception** of too many in the class, and some students left the ABE programme as a result of this. Clearly to prevent the loss of students due to this factor greater care needs to be taken not to over-enrol students, and to maintain a strict ceiling on class numbers. Anything beyond the current six-to-one ratio in TAFE would appear excessive. Perhaps the capacity of the classroom to accommodate more than one group should be considered also.

Other ways to improve student retention

We've mentioned that teachers may have to consider more the learning expectations that students bring with them to the classroom, that assessment and placement procedures need to be tightened, and that class sizes should be monitored more strictly. Interview comments indicate there may be other ways also of retaining students.

The follow-up of students who have left might be one way. Quite a number of students considered their absence from the ABE programme was temporary only, and that they would return once their circumstances improved. These are former students who still maintain a strong motivation for improving their literacy abilities, and some additional enquiry or encouragement could see them returning again without due delay. To our knowledge there are no records kept on why students leave. It seems that once students have decided to leave of their own accord, they have voted with their feet and there is no responsibility to enquire as to why they left or whether they will return. We realise this is a gross generalisation. There were instances of teachers phoning students to suggest alternative classes or enquire about why they left ("she writes the letters to me ..."), but a more systematic follow-up of students could possibly prevent some of the attrition of students from ABE.

Some students, and in particular women with heavy family responsibilities, were unable to continue to participate simply because there was no one to look after their children. Child care facilities at the college would go a long way to relieving this problem.

For other non-classroom, non-pedagogical reasons for leaving though, there appears little that can be done. Students will always find jobs in other areas, or change their working hours such that they are no longer able to participate. And it has to accepted that education will have a lower priority in most people's lives than jobs or family circumstances.

The small group literacy teaching mode

This study did not set out to compare adult literacy teaching modes. Only one teaching mode has been looked at - small group learning, and in the context of this study it would be inappropriate to make comparisons with other teaching modes such as one-to-one tuition. One of the basic tenets of adult literacy is the notion that there is no-one way to teach, that there needs to be variety of provision, and that the type of teaching depends on the individual needs of the learners.

Clearly though, comments made by respondents in this study indicated that for many, the small-group mode was most appropriate. The comment "we were like a family" is very telling. Students spoke of the sharing of ideas, the community of learning, of discovering that other students had similar problems, and that literacy problems weren't to be hidden away as a secret. Quite apart from the educational gains there were social gains, the satisfaction of meeting and working harmoniously with people from very diverse backgrounds, all with a common goal of wishing to become more literate.

These comments lend support to TAFE ABE's promotion of small-group learning "because of the opportunities they provide for educational, personal and social development" (Adult Basic Education 1987). Similar small-group learning benefits have been indicated recently in other Australian studies (eg Ennis and Davison 1989), and overseas (eg Kazemek 1988).

Further research needs

Inevitably research leads to the asking of further questions. One area in which we know little, but it certainly affected the learning experience of many students, was their expectations of the learning environment, and how this conflicted with the actual ABE experience. It would also be useful to look at different cultural factors behind expectations.

It has also become apparent that factors to do with participation in ABE, for example, why people participate or why they leave, are very complex. A lot of work needs to be done to unravel some of the complexities of participation behaviour. We would promote mainly qualitative research methods to undertake this. It would seem that through delving into individual student perspectives in some depth as with case studies, we can gain a greater understanding of these issues. It is unlikely in our opinion that statistical correlations will provide the answers to the type of questions we are posing here.

Finally, we support the need which Brennan et al (1989) highlighted, for the **process** of adult literacy teaching to be looked at in greater depth. What is it in

the pedagogy of adult literacy that brings about the outcomes cited in this study and others? How do students become more confident? We know very little about this process, about the effects of competing teaching methodologies, or about the relative effects of different types of provision. How does group tuition differ from one-to-one? Brennan's study didn't find significant differences in outcomes from different types of ABE provision, but maybe their research method wasn't suited to determining these differences.

In conclusion we feel as though we have only scratched the surface of the research required in this area, but we do feel we have made a start. We feel at least that many of the relevant factors have been identified, and it remains for other researchers, if they wish to, to follow up these factors and look at the relative importance of each of them. We also feel we have retained contact at all times with the subjects of our study. We have tried to show the "human uniqueness of individuals" from within our interview sample; we haven't reduced them or their perspectives to statistics for analysis by researchers far removed from the classroom who work in a different language from the adult literacy practitioner. There are no correlation coefficients in this study, and deliberately so. We hope that what we have outlined and what we have interpreted and highlighted in this study is accessible and useful by those in a position to improve adult literacy provision. And finally, we hope we have done justice to the perspectives of our interview sample.

APPENDIX 1

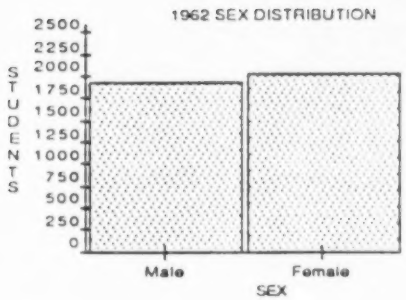
TAFE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION ENROLMENT STATISTICS 1988

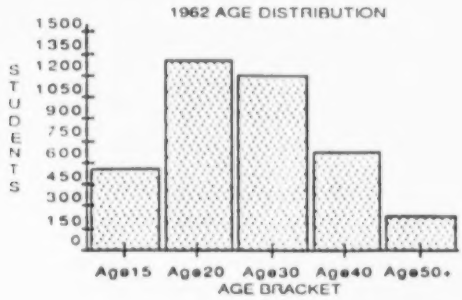
Semester 1
1988

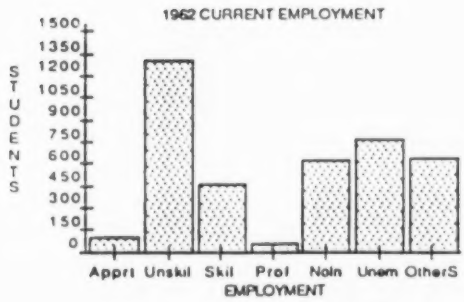
Course Title - Reading and Writing for Adults

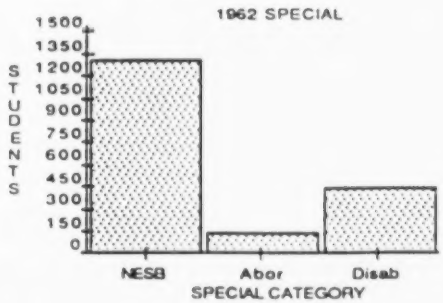
Course Number - 1962

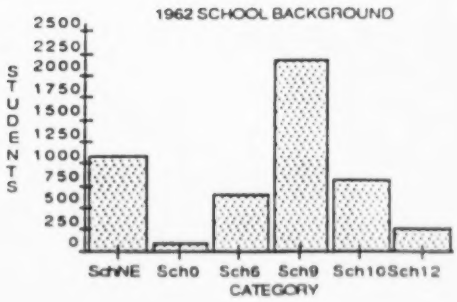
Total Enrolments = 3944

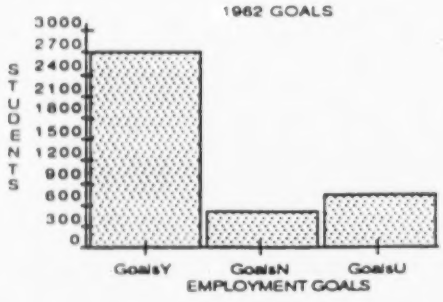












APPENDIX 2

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS TO GUIDE THE INTERVIEWER

What's your date of birth?

Where were you born?

How long have you been in Australia?

What was school like for you?

What grade did you leave?

How old were you when you left?

Did you have a job when you started the reading and writing class?

What do you like to do in your spare time that involves reading and writing?

Why did you decide to do something about your reading and writing?

Given that you said ... in the previous question, did any of those reasons change once you started classes?

What did you expect the reading and writing class to be like?

How was it different from your expectations?

How was it similar to your expectations?

Was it better or worse than you expected?

Did you have the same teacher while you were there?

Did that affect the way you felt about the class?

What do you feel you got out of the classes?

Are you reading and writing more now?

What kinds of things are you reading and writing

What changes would you like to see to improve the reading and writing class?

How could your experience in the reading and writing class have been improved?

Do you think your experience was similar to the other students in that class?

Do you think you'd like to go again some day?

Why did you leave the class (if not already covered in previous questions)?

*Please note that these questions were a **guide** only. In some interviews they served essentially as a check list for the interviewer, to ensure that most aspects had been covered in the interview.*

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